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ABSTRACT

Questionnaires were sent to 114 of the 228 editorial page editors at newspapers in the United States with daily circulations greater than 50,000 for a study that compared (1) the editor-publisher relationship existing at chains to that found at independent papers, and (2) the 1984 presidential endorsements made by chains to those by independent papers. The questionnaire contained 22 questions, 9 of which dealt with issues on which the 1984 Republican and Democratic platforms or candidates had taken opposing positions. The issues included ones that were social (abortion, ERA, school prayer, tuition tax credits); economic (tax increase); foreign policy related (aid to rebels in Nicaragua, limiting U.S. covert activity abroad); environmental (abolishing the Department of Energy); and and defense-related (space-based defense system). The remaining questions sought information about the respondents' newspaper, the process the paper followed in making an endorsement, the political leanings of the publisher and editorial page editor, and the paper's endorsement and editorial page editor's vote in the 1984 presidential race. Of the 85 editorial page editors responding, close to 58% worked for chained-owned papers. The results indicated more similarities than differences between the editorial page editors at chain and independent papers, with editors at both types of papers voting for Mondale by a wide margin. The differences that were found occurred in a paper's endorsements. The chain-owned newspapers were more likely to endorse the candidate leading in the polls, and within a chain, papers had a strong tendency to endorse the same candidate. Although editors claimed they had strong voice in determining whom their paper endorsed, little evidence was found to support their contention. (HOD)

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"Editorial Page Editors and Endorsements: Chain-owned vs. Independent Newspapers"

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"Editorial Page Editors and Endorsements:

Chain-owned vs. Independent Newspapers"

The debate over chain ownership of newspapers--whether it provides a paper financial independence or sacrifices editorial diversity in an effort to earn a profit--is unlikely to be resolved. Little conclusive evidence exists to suggest that chain-owned papers are more likely to take similar positions on issues. Nor have studies shown that chains are more apt to be staffed by editors intent on echoing the beliefs of their owners.

Nonetheless, politicians, media critics and the FCC continue to espouse the dangers of concentrated media ownership. Members of the public have also joined the chorus of criticism, telling researchers they favor independent ownership of their newspapers.[1]

Amid all of this, chain-ownership continues to grow. Groups now control nearly 80% of the circulation of the nation's daily newspapers[2] and six of every seven papers sold thus far in the 1980s has been bought by a chain.[3]

This study surveys editorial page editors and compares the editor-publisher relationship existing at chains to that found at independent papers. It also compares the 1984 presidential endorsements made by chains to those made by independent papers, and it examines stands the two types of papers took on a variety of election issues. Finally, the study explores the political leanings of editoral page editors--and their publishers--at both types of papers. Like previous studies, this one defines chain newspapers as those owned by a firm that publishes two or more daily newspapers in more than one city or metropolitan area under the same person or persons.[4]

The 31 groups who owned a mere 7.5 percent of the nation's daily

newspapers in 1923 had grown to 157 chains controlling just over half the country's dailies by 1970.[5] By 1984, 155 chains had gained control of more than 68 percent of the 1,688 daily newspapers in the United States, with chain-owned papers accounting for 78 percent of the nation's total circulation.

The number of newspaper groups has remained stable at between 150 and 170 in the past 20 years--it stood at 155 in 1984--and the number of chains may continue to drop slightly as more mergers occur. Nonetheless, the chains' share of the nation's dailies and their circulation have risen steadily since the start of this century.

An extensive study of the nation's daily newspaper editors conducted in 1979 by the American Society of Newspaper Editors drew remarkably similar responses from editors at chain and independent publications.[6] Editors in both groups indicated a general satisfaction with the authority they had in determining editorial content. The majority claimed they were "very satisfied" with the editorial independence they had been given, with those at chain-owned papers indicating a greater willingness to take stands that might be opposed by their publisher.

Twice as many of the editors at chains said they would take a stand they knew was personally opposed by their paper's owner, and more than three times as many said they never checked with the paper's headquarters--or owner--before taking a stand on a controversial issue. And while half the editors at independent papers said they normally determine the candidate their newspaper endorses in a national election, 60% of the editors at chain papers said they made that decision.

Despite the contention of editors working at chain-owned papers that they enjoy more freedom in taking important or unpopular editorial stands, little

evidence exists to support their claim.

A study of West Coast papers in 1975 found that editorials in independently-owned papers were more than twice as likely to be controversial and centered on important local issues. "Clearly, this study demonstrates that chains have had an impact on the editorial quality of the dailies they have purchased on the West Coast. And certainly, the impact is not helpful to readers who seek guidance on local matters when they turn to the editorial pages of their daily newspapers."[7]

Rystrom examined California newspapers and found that the editorials in group newspapers were more liberal--and less effective--than those found in the state's independent papers.[8]

Another study compared presidential endorsements from 1960 to 1972 made by chain papers to those made by independents. It found that chain-owned papers were more likely to support the candidate leading in the polls, and within a chain, papers had a strong tendency to endorse the same candidate. The researchers questioned the claim of autonomy frequently made by those at chains: "Clearly these data run counter to the insistence of chain spokesmen that their endorsement policies are independent from chain direction."[9]

This study further explores that charge by looking at whether newspaper endorsements in presidential elections--at both chain-owned and independent papers--more closely reflect the choice of the paper's editorial page editor or its publisher.

Before looking at the results, it should be remembered that this study singles out endorsements made in the 1984 presidential election. Results could be far different if endorsements in a state or local election were examined at chain and independent papers. It could be argued that an absentee publisher representing a conglomorate of newspapers would be far less

interested in the stand one of his papers might take in a local race than he would be a presidential endorsement.

Indeed, the editorial page editor of one chain-owned newspaper pointed out that the role his publisher takes in the endorsement process very definitely depends on the level of the election: "Our former publisher seldom intervened in the this process, but he did want to participate in the discussions when the offices of president and governor were open. Our new publisher seems to be following the same course."10

METHODOLOGY

A three-page questionnaire was sent in January 1985 to 114 of the 228 editorial page editors at newspapers in the United States with daily circulations greater than 50,000. The subjects were randomly selected from among the editorial page editors listed in the 1984 Editor and Publisher Yearbook.

The questionnaire contained 22 questions, nine of which dealt with issues on which the 1984 Republican and Democratic platforms or candidates had taken opposite stands. The issues included ones that were social (abortion, ERA, school prayer, tuition tax credits), economic (tax increase), foreign policy-related (aid to rebels in Nicaragua, limiting U.S. covert activity abroad), environmental (abolishing the Department of Energy) and defense-related (space-based defense system).

The remaining questions sought descriptive data about the paper and attempted to determine the process the paper followed in making an endorsement. The questions also sought information on the political leanings of the publisher and the editorial page editor, as well as the paper's endorsement in the 1984 presidential election and the editorial page editor's

vote in that race.

A cover letter written to each of the subjects explained that they were being asked to supply information about their paper's endorsement process and its stands on several national issues.

FINDINGS

Of the 114 questionnaires mailed, 85 were completed and returned, placing the response rate at close to 75%.

Nearly half of the responses came from newspapers with circulations between 100,000 and 250,000. Slightly more than a third had between 50,000 and 100,000, and the remainder came from papers with circulations larger than 250,000. Of the editorial page editors responding, close to 58% worked for chain-owned papers, while 42% of the editors worked at independently-owned papers.

The editorial page editors in this study were somewhat less likely than those in the ANPA study to claim control for the right to make endorsements in national elections. But little difference was found between those editors at chain papers, where 61% said publishers consulted with the paper's editorial staff in determining who to endorse, and those at independents, where the figure was 64% (see Table 1).

Similarities were also found in the satisfaction editors at both types of papers expressed in the process by which endorsements were made. At chain-owned papers, 66% of the editors were "very satisfied" with the way endorsements were handled, compared to 64% of the editors at independent papers.

While a large majority of all the editorial page editors said they voted for the candidate their paper endorsed at least three-fourths of the time, the

figure was somewhat higher among editors at independents (88%) than it was among those at chains (78%).

The editorial page editors at both types of papers claimed that when making endorsements, they agreed with their publishers more often that they disagreed with them. At chain-owned papers, 49% of the editors said they never disagreed with the paper's owner over endorsements, while 53% of those at independent papers gave such a response. Nearly all of the remaining editors said they "sometimes" disagreed with their publishers, with fewer than 5%--all of whom worked at chain papers--disagreeing frequently.

But when describing their own political beliefs, the editors at chain-owned papers claimed to be both more independent and less Democratic than their counterparts at the non-chain papers. A majority of the editors (56%) at independent papers called themselves Democrats, compared to only 33% of those at chain-owned papers. At chain-owned papers, 48% of the editors labeled themselves independent voters, compared to only 24% at the non-chain papers. The number of Republican editors at the chain-owned (19%) and independent (18%) papers was similar.

Nonetheless, the majority of editorial page editors at both types of papers claimed to be more liberal than their publishers. At chain-owned papers, 72% of the editors said they were more liberal than their publishers, compared to 68% at independent papers.

However, as described by their editorial page editors, those publishers at independent papers appeared to make up a more politically diverse group of owners, with Republicans comprising 37%, Independents 33% and Democrats 30%. At the chain-owned papers, a majority (56%) of the publishers were described as Republicans, 40% as Independents and a scant 4% as Democrats.

To a large extent, the endorsements in the 1984 presidential election

strongly reflected the publishers' political beliefs as described by their editorial page editors. At chain-owned papers, Reagan enjoyed a 65-25% edge, but at independent papers, support was evenly split, with 44% endorsing Reagan and 44% backing Mondale.

Although nearly two-thirds of the chain-owned papers supported Reagan, editors at the majority of those newspapers, like their counterparts at independent papers, supported the 1984 Democratic candidate for president. In fact, the editors at chain-owned papers voted for Mondale by a 57-35% margin while those at the independent papers said they voted for Mondale 58-40%.

Despite the nearly 3 to 1 edge Reagan enjoyed among endorsements made at chain-owned papers, the positions he took on nine 1984 campaign issues drew little support from these same publications. In fact, the stands taken by the chain-owned papers varied little from the positions advocated by the independent papers, which divided their endorsements.

Two highly-publicized Reagan proposals, a constitutional amendment outlawing abortions and another permitting prayer in school, were opposed by margins of at least 7 to 1 by both types of papers. By margins of 3 to 1, editorials in chains and independents opposed the GOP tuition tax credit plan while supporting the Equal Rights Amendment.

By large margins, the papers in both categories supported Mondale's call for a tax increase. A substantial majority also editorialized against U.S. aid to the Contras in Nicaragua and for stricter limits on covert operations abroad. In each instance, their stands were in line with those taken by the Democrats and opposed by the Repubicans in the 1984 presidential election.

The only marked difference occurred on the question of a space-based defense system, which the chain-owned papers had opposed by a 5-point margin and the independents by 18 points. But even there, the difference was not

statistically significant.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results of the survey indicate that more similarities than differences exist between the editorial page editors at chain and independent papers. Both say they work for publishers who are more conservative than they are. But for the most part, they are satisfied with their papers' endorsement process, rarely disagree with their publisher over an endorsement and support their paper's candidate most of the time.

Additionally, the editors at both types of papers were voting for Mondale in 1984 by a wide margin at a time when voters were electing Reagan in a landslide. The editors' support of the Democratic candidate was echoed in the strong backing their editorial pages gave to eight of nine Democratic stands on election issues.

The few areas in which differences were found between the chain-owned and independent editors and their papers, however, raise several important questions, including one about the direction of future newspaper endorsements. The publishers of chain-owned newspapers are considerably more conservative than their counterparts at independent newspapers, and these conservative publishers appear to have played a role in giving Reagan the more than 2-1 edge in endorsements he enjoyed at their newspapers.

As the number of chain-owned publications continues to rise--as it has done for the past 75 years—it appears likely that newspaper ownership will be in increasingly conservative hands. As a result, the percentage of newspapers endorsing Republican candidates in national elections is likely to remain high.

At the same time, the similarity in stands taken by the chain and

independent papers indicates that ownership plays little role in determining the day-to-day content of the editorial page. If owners of the growing number of chain-owned papers continue to give their editors the freedom they now enjoy in taking editorial stands, it is unlikely that the editorial page will become more conservative.

The overwhelming support the chain-owned papers gave Reagan also raises questions about the claim of the editorial page editors--one they expressed in both this study and earlier ones--that they have a strong voice in determining whom their newspaper endorses. Apparently, however, taking a stand against the publisher's candidate for president is an exception.

Equally puzzling is that those working for chains were twice as likely as those at non-chain papers to call themselves Independents while voting overwhelmingly for the Democratic presidential candidate. Although only a fourth of the editors at the non-chain papers called themselves Independents--compared to half at the chains--the two groups voted almost identically in the 1984 election.

This study, like earlier surveys, shows a tendency among editors at chain-owned papers to claim independence--both in taking editorial stands and in their own voting behavior. But again, little evidence is found to support their contention.

The editorial page editors at the chain papers said they were pleased with an endorsement process in which they reported having a strong voice. But this process left their newspaper endorsing a candidate whom they personally opposed and one whose positions they had consistently opposed on their newspaper's editorial pages.

As studies continue to show that newspaper endorsements do play a role in determining the voting behavior of readers,[11] future researchers might

want to explore why editorial page editors at chain-owned papers don't fight more effectively to win endorsements for the candidates they support.

Table 1

Responses from Editorial Page Editors

	Chain-owned Newspapers	Independent Newspapers
Very satisfied with endorsement process	66%	64%
Never disagree with publisher over endorsement	49%	53%
Vote for endorsed candidate 3/4 of the time	78%	88%
Publisher more conservative than editor	72%	68%
Publisher is a Republican	55%	36% *
Publisher is an Independent	40%	33%
Publisher is a Democrat	5%	37% *
Editorial page editor is a Republican	19%	18%
Editorial page editor is an Independent	48%	24% *
Editorial page editor is a Democrat	33%	58% *
Paper endorsed Reagan in 1984	65%	44% *
Paper endorsed Mondale in 1984	25%	44% *
No endorsement made in 1984	10%	12%
Editorial page editors voting for Reagan in 1984	35%	39%
Editorial page editors voting for Mondale in 1984	57%	58%

* $p < .05$

FOOTNOTES

[1] E.F. Einsiedel and James P. Winter, "Public Attitudes on Media Ownership: Demographic and Attitudinal Correlates," Journalism Quarterly, 60:87-92 (1983).

[2] "Groups still own most U.S. dailies," Editor & Publisher, April 28, 1984, p. 76.

[3] Dennis F. Hale, "An in-depth look at chain ownership," Editor & Publisher, April 28, 1984, p. 88.

[4] "News and Editorial Independence: A Survey of Group and Independent Editors," American Society of Newspaper Editors, April, 1980.

[5] "Groups still own most U.S. dailies," p. 76.

[6] "News and Editorial Independence: A Survey of Group and Independent Editors."

[7] Ralph R. Thrift Jr., "How Chain Ownership Affects Editorial Vigor of Newspapers," Journalism Quarterly, 54:327-331 (1977).

[8] Kenneth Rystrom, "The Impact of Newspaper Endorsements," Newspaper Research Journal, Vol. 4 (Winter 1986), pp. 19-28.

[9] Daniel P. Wackman et al., "Chain Newspaper Autonomy as Reflected in Presidential Campaign Endorsements," Journalism Quarterly, 52:93-98 (1975).

[10] "Endorsements Secrets," Masthead, Fall, 1980, p. 6.

[11] Maxwell McCombs, "Editorial Endorsements: A Study of Influence," Journalism Quarterly, 44:545-548 (1967); John P. Robinson, "The Press as King-maker: What Surveys From the Last Five Campaigns Show," Journalism Quarterly, 51:587-594 (1974); and Robert E. Hurd and Michael W. Singletary, "Newspaper Influence On the 1984 Presidential Election Vote," Journalism Quarterly, (1984).